

## Vision needed for Delta

It's hard to believe that World Ag Expo turned 40 years old this week. Yet, such important milestones afford us opportunities for reflection, reconsideration and the ability to define our future.

As we recognize the rapidly changing dynamics of our planet, and the challenge that global climate change presents, the way we manage our water infrastructure must also change. Thanks to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's leadership, we are securing a safe and reliable water supply, protecting people and property from flood and ensuring the state's productive agricultural harvest.

Californians made an investment last November to repair levees and improve flood protection, supporting the first phase of the Governor's Strategic Growth Plan. This will provide nearly \$5 billion to keep people safe from floods and an additional \$1 billion for integrated water management and recycling. We're also working on a second phase of the plan, that if passed by the Legislature and placed on the ballot in November this year, will include nearly \$6 billion for building new water reservoirs, enhancing a sustainable Delta, increasing the state's water supply and funding water conservation and stewardship efforts.

Ultimately, the dividends of these investments depend upon a sustainable Delta and this is why, through an executive order the governor signed last fall, we created the "Delta Vision" plan. The Delta touches the lives of every Californian. Formed by the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers, it is one of the state's — and nation's — great natural treasures. Home to more than 700 native species of plants, fish and animals, traversed by hundreds of gas lines, six highways, five high voltage lines and three railroads, it's also the hub of the state's water supply system. In the Central Valley, the Delta is a key resource for the water we drink and use to sustain our agricultural industry.

The Delta is also in peril. Held together by 1,100 miles of fragile levees, the threat of flooding exists throughout the year, not just during the winter storm season. Many of the Delta's islands now lie below sea level, sinking lower every time a plow passes and the peat soil is carried away on the Delta breeze. Four species of fish have dramatically declined in abundance over the past five years. And the desire for affordable housing, close to urban centers, means that increased development will change the character of this unique and historic place.

Preserving this treasure and protecting us from its peril are at the heart of "Delta Vision" and a challenge issued by the governor: To develop a durable vision for management of a sustainable Delta and a strategic plan for its implementation.

We recognize that this is no small undertaking. Competing interests have battled over the Delta's resources for decades. But we believe that the Delta Vision Blue Ribbon Task Force, composed of seven expertly-qualified individuals and named by the governor last week, will make a significant difference. Common among all members is a strong ability to understand and solve complex problems. Under the leadership of Task Force Chairman Phil Isenberg, the group will start from the premise that business as usual will not — and cannot — work in the Delta any longer. Later this week, I will name a 40-member Delta stakeholder group that will work with the task force and play an integral role in representing local interests statewide.

Our knowledge of the Delta has been advanced greatly over the past several decades. What we know today, from the effects of global climate change to moving water through the Delta for a growing population, has come from research done by local, state and federal agencies, academic institutions and stakeholders throughout California. Last week, a study released by the California Public Policy Institute bolstered our "Delta Vision" by verifying much of what we've learned. The task force will draw upon this work — and request additional research as necessary — to arrive at recommendations by the end of 2008 that are both innovative and capable of being implemented.

The real debate centers on what needs to be done long-term to make the Delta environment sustainable and the consequences of those decisions on the Delta as the hub of California's water supply system. As California's largest river, the Sacramento River transports water from the Shasta and Oroville dams to the Delta, where it then flows west to the bay, and south to the federal and state water projects and then into agricultural land in the San Joaquin Valley and urban areas in Santa Clara and Southern California. The Sacramento River also sustains four runs of Chinook salmon that provide more than 80 — and sometimes 90 — percent of the commercial and sport salmon fishery off California's coast.

We're dependent upon this natural system for high quality and reliable water, a system that also supports important natural resources upon which many Californians also depend.

"Delta Vision" is all about finding that balance. Although a long-term sustainable Delta may not be able to serve these competing interests equally, we also cannot allow ourselves to think this means there can be only one winner.

By working together, we will be able to develop innovative ideas, plans and policies that will create a sustainable Delta. By working together, we can make a difference, we will make a difference.

**• *Mike Chrisman is a Visalia rancher and fourth generation Californian. He serves as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's Secretary for Resources.***